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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE

OSD FOR COMMANDER CHAFFEE

WHITEHOUSE FOR NSC/WEUROPE

E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: July 23, 2007

Trial for Those Who Fire

¶1. Independent daily "Der Standard" reports on the rekindled debate about whether Eurofighter pilots are to use military force against civilian planes that are hijacked by terrorists. Erich Speck, the trade union representative of the air force was quoted as calling it "a shame to shift this responsibility onto a young pilot." On Friday, the National Security Council stipulated that an impending terror attack was a national security issue and that the order to fire was to come from the Minister of the Interior - the union representatives consider such a case as an attack on Austria and thus the responsibility of the armed forces. The supreme commander of the armed forces, General Lieutenant G|nter Hfler, on the other hand, is of the opinion that all parties concerned would have to stand trial if it came to a situation where military force had to be used to bring down a hijacked plane. [Der Standard, p. 7]
EU Reform Conference Trembling Before Poland

¶2. Independent daily "Der Standard" reports on the governmental conference about the future of the EU, which is to begin in Brussels on Monday. At the June summit, where the framework for a reduced version of the EU constitution was negotiated, the Poles pushed for more voting rights for their country and almost caused the summit to fail. It is now feared that the expected negotiations about the technical and legal details of the reform treaty could once again culminate in lengthy debates with the Poles about fundamental issues. [Der Standard, p. 3]
Agreement on a reform treaty would have to be universal - and that is the snag: In addition to Polish concerns, other states such as the Netherlands and Italy have already indicated that they would withhold their consent if the summit agreement was changed in any way, writes independent daily "Der Standard." The reform treaty is the crucial issue with regard to re-organizing EU institutions and redistributing voting rights. The Portuguese EU presidency has already made clear that it will not stray from the decisions made at the summit which, at the time, the Poles agreed to as well. The preliminary agreement stipulates, among other things, that there will be a "double majority principle": 55 percent of the states, which additionally represent 65 percent of the population, are necessary for a majority decision. Also, the EU will get a "High Commissioner for Foreign and Security Policy" who will represent the Union internationally.

Landslide for Erdogan

¶3. All Austrian media report on the clear victory which Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamic-conservative AKP party scored in Sunday's elections. According to independent daily "Salzburger Nachrichten," it was estimated that the AKP achieved

between 47 and 50 percent of the vote, which means that it can continue to govern alone. It will occupy more than 330 seats out of the 550 seats in Parliament. The Republican People's Party of opposition leader Deniz Baykal got around 18 percent of the votes (almost 100 seats) and the nationalist MHP received ten percent of the votes (more than 80 seats) required for representation in Parliament. The daily points out the importance of these elections, which were brought forward from the original date by four months: It is seen as deciding the direction in which the country will move. At present, there is increasing polarization within Turkey between the religious and the secular forces. [Salzburger Nachrichten, p. 1 and 7, other Austrian media]

The crucial issue, according to mass circulation daily "Kurier," is how the military will react to the election results. The generals distrust Prime Minister Erdogan and his AKP. At the end of April, the military obstructed the election of Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül to the office of President with an indirect threat of a military coup. The military, which sees itself as the institution that ensures the separation of religion and state, has become more and more powerful. "Kurier" quotes former army judge Umit Kardas, who turned into one of the biggest critics of the system, as saying that "the military is the state." The daily also reports on the concern expressed by the EU office in Ankara about the increased importance of the military. However, a military coup would not only be unpopular in Turkey, but would also isolate the country on the international scene. Analyzing the situation in Turkey after the election, senior editor for independent daily "Salzburger Nachrichten" Helmut L. Müller concludes that "[t]he election triumph of the AKP does not mean that the political crisis in Turkey has already been solved. The crucial question of how the issue of the controversial candidature for President will be solved is still open. ... Erdogan would be well-advised to suggest a compromise candidate for the position of President despite the increase in votes for the AKP - no matter whether the head of state is to be elected by the Parliament - as has been the case so far - or directly by the people. An amiable solution would take into consideration the fact that Turkish society was polarized politically, and it would take away any pretext that the army could have to once again intervene politically."

Psychological War Continues

14. All Austrian media report on the hostage drama currently taking place in Afghanistan, where two Germans and 23 South Korean hostages are still held by the Taliban, which is demanding the withdrawal of international troops and the liberation of prisoners. Over the weekend, one of the Germans was found dead in the province of Wardak. According to centrist daily "Die Presse," it is still not clear whether the man was shot or died of heart failure. The confusion about the fate of the South Koreans also continues. The Taliban had originally threatened to murder the hostages on Sunday, unless 23 prisoners were freed - later, the ultimatum was extended by 24 hours. [Die Presse, p. 4; other Austrian media] Meanwhile, the Foreign Ministry in Berlin has confirmed that one of the German hostages is dead - however, it is believed that the man, who suffered from diabetes, died of a heart attack as a result of the kidnapping. In an analysis of the events in Afghanistan, centrist daily "Die Presse" speculates that Germany is being targeted by Afghan extremists - as were Canada and the Netherlands before. In October, the German Parliament will vote on prolonging the Afghan mission - a variety of hostile acts could serve to increase the number of opponents of the mission. Support for the mission is eroding in parts of the government and especially among the opposition. Especially controversial is the participation in the US-led anti-terror command "Operation Enduring Freedom." So far, however, the government in Berlin has been unyielding - Chancellor Angela Merkel has stressed Germany's intention not to leave the Afghans in the lurch and SPD floor leader Peter Struck is one of the fiercest opponents of withdrawal, writes "Die Presse."

US Intelligence Says Bin Laden Is Alive in Pakistan

15. ORF online reports on findings by US intelligence services according to which Osama bin Laden is still alive and hiding somewhere near the Afghan border in the western part of Pakistan. In an interview with TV station NBC on Sunday, the coordinator of the US intelligence services, Michael McConnell, held the Pakistan

government responsible for the fact that al-Qaida was able to regroup and claimed that instead of pushing al-Qaida out of Pakistan, the government had "created a safe haven for training and recruitment." In spite of this fact, he said that Pakistan's President Musharraf is still an important ally. [ORF online]

Republicans Stumbling Through the Election Campaign

16. In an assessment of the current state of the "Grand Old Party" Norbert Rief, correspondent of centrist daily "Die Presse," refers to the difficulties the Republicans are having to find a candidate for the White House who voters are prepared to accept. [Die Presse, July 21, p. 10]

For 2008 - so Rief's conclusion - the Republicans have as yet no strong frontrunner. All the candidates that have surfaced so far have trouble getting strong support: Mitt Romney's hurdle is his religious belief - he is a Mormon, and many Republicans find this difficult to accept; Rudy Giuliani, on the other hand, is universally popular, but does not have the backing of conservative Republicans because of his support of abortion and weapons control. However, it is John McCain, who once was regarded the favorite among the possible candidates, who has seen the most drastic decline. His campaign is about to flop; he already had to dismiss half of his staff because of lack of money. In view of dwindling donations, it is questionable how long McCain will still be able to maintain his campaign.

Kilner